

Get off the backs of teachers

FLINT — We've badgered them, pink-slipped them, scolded them, shrunk their pay, cut their benefits, and angrily blamed them for all of American society's ills, with the possible exceptions of foot odor and reality TV.

Don't you think it's high time we got off the backs of teachers?

I've never in my life seen a class of workers demonized the way teachers have been the last 10 years.

And the irony is that we've done it while saying, "But we love teachers! Teachers are important! Yay, teachers!"

If I were a teacher my response would be, "Yeah, well, you've got a funny way of showing it."

I don't know when our national obsession with "bad" teachers as the cause of bad schools and aimless kids began. But it doesn't jibe with my experience. Yours, too, I'll bet.

I have three kids at all stages of their public school careers. With one possible exception, I've had



Andy Heller

no problem with how their teachers have done their job. Many, in fact, were good to outstanding.

Before you make the obvious criticism, yes, my kids are lucky. We live in a nice, comfortable suburb with good schools.

But ask any teacher anywhere — in dis-

tricts great and small, rich and poor, urban or rural — if they've felt singled out as a profession and I'll bet the answer is yes.

That's not self-pity. You can't open a paper the last 10 years without seeing a story about how test scores are down, kids are dumber and America is falling behind the rest of the world.

And it's all teachers' fault.

They're not trained well. They're not dedicated. They don't work long enough or hard enough. (Gosh, they only work nine months a year! And for full pay — can you imagine!)

You seldom read a word about bad school administrators, inept

school board leadership or lack of financial support by the community or the state.

Nor do you ever hear a word about the true source of America's educational woes: Parents. Or the lack thereof.

There's an old saying, "Garbage in, garbage out," and while that's a crude way of describing what's happening to American education, it's still largely true nonetheless.

Teachers work with what we give them. "Miracle" districts notwithstanding, we send them hungry, tired, sick, ill-behaved children who weren't read to when they were young, nor taught to value hard work and discipline, and then we say, "Hey, why didn't you fix all that?"

Then, if that weren't enough, we pile on by dragging them and their work into the middle of what are essentially political, not educational, fights involving charter schools, unions and tenure.

Could you blame teachers for feeling unappreciated? Likewise, could you blame the best and brightest college students

for saying, "Become a teacher? Um, I don't think so."

Yes, there are bad teachers. But I'll bet they're in relatively equal proportion to the number of bad employees in other professions.

Blame the decline of the nuclear family for our supposed educational decline. Blame the end of shame. Blame whomever and whatever you want. But it's high time we stopped blaming teachers for not turning sow's ears into silk purses.

Let me be the lone radical voice on this issue: I think most teachers are doing just fine, and as a class of employees they deserve a word of thanks and a national apology rather than further demonization.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Andy Heller, an award-winning columnist for *The Flint Journal*, appears weekly in the *Daily Press*. He graduated from Escanaba Area High School in 1979. For more of his work, visit his blog at blog.mlive.com/flintjournal/aheller. You can e-mail him at aheller@flintjournal.com.